

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON POST
9 November 1986

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News as A Weapon

Disinformation has been the subject of much editorial discussion the past month. Everybody seems to have forgotten that the Soviets invented only the word, not the practice, which is despicable. It does take on a kind of respectability in wartime because news, true or false, is viewed by the military as another weapon to destroy the enemy by confusing them. In an open society such as ours, even in an all-out war, there is danger of confusing your friends more than your enemies.

In World War II, all nations used disinformation, or black propaganda, as it was called then. In Washington, with the United Press, I sensed that my competition, the Associated Press's Sterling Green, was on to a

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big story. He scored with an exclusive splashed on the front pages of The Washington Post, The Washington Star and The New York Times.

It said that Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, commander of U.S. European Forces in London, had been ordered to return to Washington the following week for consultations with the high command to discuss details of a second front. President Roosevelt on the following day excoriated the press for publishing such unfounded speculation. A few days later, on Nov. 8, 1942, U.S. troops, led by Gen. Eisenhower, invaded North Africa. It probably was this country's first venture into deliberately planting false information in the U.S. news media. There is no way of knowing whether it was of any military value. That was a one-shot.

But a continuing disinformation program that this country's intelligence people promoted over a long period during that war backfired. It was billed as a "mobile underground radio station" operating inside Nazi Germany and broadcasting daily defiance to Hitler. Monitored by an Allied listening post, the translated texts were distributed to U.S. newspapers and received considerable attention.

The Gestapo wasn't fooled; but the program did give false hope to American families who were led to believe that the Hitler regime might be on the verge of collapse.

One of the most secret U.S. black propaganda programs, however, was effective, and Americans weren't aware of it until decades after the war. It was the brainchild of an intelligence agent named Eugene Warner, who had been a Washington newspaperman, one of the first reporters hired by Eugene Meyer after he bought The Post. Under Mr. Warner's supervision at a secret Allied installation in Rome, the OSS—precursor of the CIA—was turning out a one-page newspaper, called *Das Neue Deutschland*, which purported to be an underground anti-Hitler newspaper published and distributed inside Germany.

Under tight security, it was printed on cheap paper that might be available to a subversive group, with an odd assortment of type. There was one seemingly insurmountable problem in this project, which any newspaper publisher could have alerted Mr. Warner to: home delivery.

Mr. Warner came up with a brilliant plan. Telephone directories of the large German cities were collected, and mailing lists were prepared from each. German stamps, were counterfeited; German-type mail pouches were duplicated to the last stitch. Envelopes were printed with return addresses of German business establishments likely to make large mailings to private homes.

The envelopes were addressed, stamped, properly canceled and into them went "The New Germany"; the envelopes were stuffed into mail sacks. Railway timetables were studied, and every day fighter-bombers took off on the hunt for a railroad train heading toward a specific German city.

When the quarry was spotted, one element swooped down and loosed demolition bombs on locomotive and cars. After them came B-25s at treetop level, machine guns blazing away to keep surviving heads down, and from their bomb bays came hundreds of mail sacks, strewn among the wreckage.

Unfailingly, rescue crews, with German efficiency, gathered up the scattered mail and turned it over to the post office.

Mr. Warner won a bronze star and a presidential citation. More important to him was learning later that advancing Allied troops reported that Germans were surrendering with copies of this newspaper to show that they were anti-Nazis.

That was disinformation's finest hour. And I'd like to think its only one.